

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1

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Congress wants to 'even odds' in East-West spy game

By Warren Richey

Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

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From the grounds of the Soviet Embassy, to the halls of the United Nations, to the board room of the smallest East-bloc trading firm doing business in the US, American officials are determined to make life as difficult as possible for Soviet spies.

The effort comes at a time when Americans are witnessing more arrests and public disclosures about spying in the United States than at any time since World War II.

In the past three years, 25 individuals have been arrested on spy charges in the US. During the same period, 20 Soviet and East-bloc intelligence officers were expelled from the country, according to Senate testimony given this week by William H. Webster, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

"The free world today is confronted with the most audacious, well-run campaign in modern history of illegal trade diversions, espionage, and acquisitions of publicly available information," says Richard N. Perle, assistant secretary of defense. Mr. Perle and Mr. Webster testified before the same Senate panel.

American officials are concerned that the US response to this Soviet intelligence offensive has been piecemeal, leaving large loopholes in US counterintelligence strategy.

The basic problem is that there are too many spies and too few American counterintelligence agents to watch them.

A solution being considered by lawmakers is to reduce the total number of potential spies in the US and to increase the restrictions on the rest.

Specific countermeasures under discussion in the Senate would:

- Limit the number of Soviet diplomats stationed in the US to the number of American diplomats stationed in the Soviet Union. The administration has agreed to this proposal, but it is uncertain to what extent its pending enactment will lead to an actual reduction in the number of Soviets stationed in the US.

- Reduce the size of the Soviet mission to the United Nations. Long considered a nest of spies, the Soviet mission is now two times as large as the next largest UN missions — those of the US and China.

- Deny or reduce US credit and special trade status to Soviet-allied nations discovered spying against the US. This determination would be based on an annual US intelligence report to Congress. The measure would be aimed at discouraging the Soviets' East-bloc allies from working as surrogates for Soviet intelligence.

- Restrict travel of East-bloc diplomats to 25 miles from the city in which they are stationed. Currently only Soviet diplomats face such travel restrictions.

- Restrict travel of businessmen working for state-owned Soviet-bloc companies and trading organizations. Many of the 55 such firms in the US are said by the FBI to be front organizations for spies who use their business connections to gain entry to sensitive industries and to recruit vulnerable Americans.

- Establish a top-level US scientific advisory team to assess the technological needs of the Soviet military. The idea is that by anticipating which US technology Soviet spies may be seeking, American counterintelligence officials would be better able to stay a step ahead of their counterparts in the KGB. Private firms involved in targeted technologies could also be alerted to watch for foreign agents.

- Deny Soviet and East-bloc students entry into engineering and advanced science programs involving potentially sensitive technology. American intelligence officials have long complained that East-bloc students in the US almost exclusively study advanced science and engineering, while Americans in Moscow concentrate on the humanities.

Intelligence experts agree that it is easier to keep an eye on a relatively small pool of potential foreign spies than to conduct detailed surveillance of the 4 million Americans holding security clearances to handle government secrets.

The FBI estimates that roughly one-third of the 2,500 Soviet and East-bloc officials stationed in the US are undercover intelligence agents.

In addition, more than 15,000 students and 90,000 visitors from the Soviet bloc enter the country each year. It is assumed that many of them are here on espionage missions.

"The threat comes not only from Soviet and bloc officials posted in the United States, but from trade representatives, correspondents, students, scholars, scientists, and tourists," says the FBI's Webster.

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Despite budget increases, the FBI does not have the manpower to assign agents to closely monitor the movements of every possible communist spy.

Travel restrictions and reductions in the numbers of officials permitted in the US would help even the score from the point of view of US counterintelligence experts.

But the State Department is concerned that new restrictions might cause a backlash against our own diplomats in the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries, hindering our own ability to collect intelligence behind the Iron Curtain.